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ABSTRACT

The Secondary Education program at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) completed its second year of partnerships with local public secondary schools. During the 2003-04 school year, SIUE partnered with two schools. Prior to the second year of the partnerships, data regarding student perceptions of their experiences during the pre-student teaching and student teaching semesters were collected via anecdotal conversations conducted throughout the year. Focus groups conducted with each cohort and with students from non-partnership placements examined student teachers' perceptions of their experiences during each phase as well as alignment of expectations and experiences for each phase; relationships and communication with cooperating teachers, the School of Education, and advisors in the Office of Clinical Experience and Certification Advisement; and preparedness for each phase of the pre-student and student teaching experience. Overall, virtually all of the partnership students felt their yearlong experience was beneficial. The quality of support partnership and nonpartnership student teachers received from their cooperating teachers varied considerably. Partnership students liked the quality of the seminars conducted throughout the year by university coordinators, but wanted more time to learn about classroom management and lesson planning before beginning their student teaching. (SM)

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Title: "You've Got to Learn the Territory": An Initial Assessment of a Partnership Model for Successful Student Teaching

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OVERVIEW

How, if at all, does a student teacher's thinking about the art and craft of teaching change during the student teaching experience? One could argue that addressing this question is an essential exercise in planning and implementing any student teacher program. No matter how well intended and how well designed the learning experiences teacher educators provide for student teachers, they cannot be deemed successful if aspiring candidates complete their student teaching without engaging in meaningful reflective thought. The voices of their mentors, espousing best practices in teaching and learning may soon be drowned out by the cacophonous din of conflicting messages bombarding these novice teachers once they enter the public school culture.

But how does one know what student teachers are thinking? Ferreting out clues from observations, anecdotal records and conversations with cooperating teachers can be dicey at best. Information gathered in this way is somewhat analogous to looking through a keyhole into a hall of mirrors. Yet look we must if we wish to identify and begin to understand linkages between student teaching experiences and student thinking that may be indicators of professional growth.

Johnson and Landers-Macrine (1998), add another dimension to this question. They assert that what is of most importance is clarifying and defining what is meant when we talk about student teacher's thinking (p.1).

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In partial answer, Brookfield (as cited in Patton, 1994) identified five themes encompassing critical thought activities:

Impostership-	**the sense that participating in critical thought is an act of bad Faith**
Cultural suicide-	**the recognition that challenging conventional assumptions risks cutting people off from the cultures that have defined them**
Lost innocence-	**the move from dualistic certainty toward dialectical and multiplistic modes of reasoning**
Road running-	**the incrementally fluctuating flirtation with new modes of thought and being**
Community-	**the importance of sustaining a support group to those in critical process**

While one might create other terms to describe the various "themes" of thinking, it would seem fairly safe to assume that student teachers run the gamut in their thinking processes prior to, during, and directly after their student teaching experience.

Some student teachers undoubtedly fall into the thematic category of *imposters.* Before they arrive at the classroom door, these students bring what might be called a missionary mindset to the experience. They have, in their judgment been *anointed* by their education and like diligent apostles, are ready to put into uncritical practice what their wise mentors have taught them. Should they harbor doubts, they accuse themselves of being *imposters,* ones who have not been able to fathom the truth of their mentors' teachings. If they are coerced into dipping their toes into critical reflection, they would likely draw back with a shudder from the chill, sobering waters and ignore what experience is telling them; or perhaps worse, reject critical thinking as an act of heresy. These folks find themselves in an untenable position, one that cannot last for long. They may leave the profession, disillusioned and disheartened, die a glorious professional death, their banners furled on the school house floor, or else reject the pedagogical liturgy they so painfully and expensively acquired. They pay dearly for choosing any of

these paths. They tender as payment the very passion for teaching that called them to the profession.

Most student teachers recognize that their future employment potential hinges heavily on their successful completion of the student teaching experience. They logically, and perhaps rightly assume that should they be perceived as individuals who run counter to the prevailing cultures of the university and public high school, they may be labeled as troublesome and unprofessional by those who have real or imagined powers over them. Fear of being excommunicated from the cultures that define them can limit the rigor and content of critical thinking and concomitant professional growth. Unlike their aforementioned peers who fear critical thinking because it smacks of heresy, these student teachers choose to "go along to get along". They have no trouble harboring mutually contradictory realities. Political and social forces within the public school system readily support them in this uncritical way of operating and thinking. Once habituated to this uncritical practice of the profession, these folks rarely become involved in any change initiative unless they perceive it to be supported by the majority of those they deem to be in positions of power within the culture. Then, and only then will they join in, but only in ways they consider to be safe and non-controversial.

Ambiguity, paradox, and irony, three siblings sired in the heated conjoining of entropy and creation, work their insidious ways into the thinking of all who are involved in teaching and learning in the increasingly complex world of the public school. Sensitive and thoughtful aspiring teacher candidates sense themselves to be especially vulnerable when they confront the workings of this riotous trio. What they have learned at the university, from their cultures and their own experiences in public schools may not translate well when they must create order within contemporary school cultures. Consequently, these individuals may find themselves oscillating between and among conflicting realities. Unlike their aforementioned peers who choose not to reflect upon the ambiguities they encounter, these individuals find this state of confusion to be overpowering. Cognitive and affective dissonances could temporarily or permanently impair their ability and desire to engage in reflective practice. These student teachers may find themselves trapped

in a destructive cycle between Brookfield's *Lost innocence* and *Road running* themes of thinking and may never advance to the point where critical thinking results in meaningful professional growth.

One might infer that Brookfield's model directs us towards fostering elements within the last theme: *community*-creating a culture that supports and sustains critical thinking. Certainly, individuals may think critically and creatively in a society without a supporting group. Iconoclasts, gadflies, and self-nominated critics abound in any human collective and public schools are no exception. Generally, these folks find themselves marginalized by their culture. Whatever their message, it becomes lost as they are shunted into rear echelons where their voices cannot be heard: not a desirable fate we would wish for our student teachers.

For meaningful critical thinking to occur within a culture, individuals must be posited within a support group in the culture that welcomes and supports critical dialogue. The support group's norms and values related to critical thinking must be understood, accepted and sustained if members are to engage in unfettered reflection that results in empowerment and personal and professional growth. If one accepts these inter-related assumptions as necessary for the advancement of any individual's reflective thinking and empowerment within a culture, it would logically follow that providing that type of support group for student teachers must be a vital part of what we as teacher educators provide for them.

SIUE's partnership program is intended to build strong, sustaining support groups that foster critical, reflective thinking about teaching and learning within and between university and partnering public school faculties involved in teacher education. After two years of formative development and anecdotally informed assessment, it became apparent that we needed to take additional steps to determine how we were doing. This initial study is the result.

HISTORY OF THE PROGRAM

The Secondary Education program at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville completed its second year of partnerships with local public secondary schools in the Metro East area of Southern Illinois. The Metro East area is located

"across the river" from St. Louis, Missouri. The area is loosely defined as the metropolitan area east of St. Louis, Missouri compromising Madison and St. Claire Counties in Illinois.

During the school year 2003-04, SIUE partnered with two Metro East public secondary schools: Cahokia and Collinsville high schools. Two new partnerships will begin in school year 2003-04, and two more are planned for 2004-05, bringing the total number of partnerships to six. The goal for the Secondary Education Program is to place all students who plan to teach core subject areas at the secondary level in partnership programs.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Prior to the second year of the partnerships, data regarding student Perceptions of their experiences during the pre-student teaching and student teaching semesters were largely derivative of anecdotal conversations conducted intermittently throughout the year between and among students, cooperating teachers, content advisors, and School of Education site coordinators. While information generated during these conversations was, in many instances helpful to students as they grappled with immediate problems and issues, we did not have any formal method of compiling data for use in assessing specific facets of the pre-student teaching and student teaching semesters, or indeed assessing the overall efficacy of the entire year's experience. The need was apparent and immediate, especially in light of our plans to increase the number of partnerships to include all students in our secondary teaching program.

It seemed the most logical place to start our assessment was with our clients, the student teachers. We could, of course have chosen initially to rely on student course evaluation data, generated as a natural part of the university's required course evaluation process but that information would not have been entirely useful because the evaluation instrument was designed to be used with all courses offered at the university. Consequently, it could not target our assessment objectives. We could also have created a questionnaire or survey that asked students to "bubble in" rankings for items addressing our targeted assessment foci. While questionnaires

and surveys do serve useful purposes, and may indeed be used as part of our future assessment activities, we concluded that focus groups would provide more useful information that would help us plan for and implement changes "just in time" for the next year's partnership cohorts.

We recognized that any attempt at assessment conducted as the students were virtually walking out the door after completing the program could not meaningfully portray the entirety of the student's experience. We therefore agreed that conducting focus groups with each cohort and another with students from non-partnership placements could at least help us to gain a general sense of where we were so that we could address immediate changes that needed to be made for next year. We will subsequently develop on-going assessment methods that will provide us with data generated over the entire year.

In our discussions we decided that relationships were key elements of sustaining supportive groups conducive to nurturing critical thinking. We therefore developed our focus group questions and prompts to elicit student teacher perceptions of their relationships with those individuals who were directly involved with their student teaching experience. Individuals we identified as being most important to establishing supportive sustaining groups were: cooperating teachers, School of Education coordinators, content advisors, and Office of Clinical Experience and Certification advisors. Certainly, building principals, high school teachers not serving as cooperating teachers, support staff, and other students in the partnership cohort would, in varying degrees play important roles in developing and sustaining supportive relationships but for the immediate needs of our current assessment efforts, we felt that the individuals we chose were the most vital to the process of inculcating critical reflection and dialogue.

METHODOLOGY

Focus Group Strengths and Weaknesses

Patton (2002) outlines many of the advantages and limitations of focus groups as a method of inquiry. Among the advantages are:

- In a relatively short period of time one can gather information from a small group of people.
- Interactions among participants enhance data quality. Participants tend to be provide checks and balances on each other, which weeds out false or extreme views.
- The extent to which thee is a relatively consistent, shared view or great diversity of views can be quickly assessed.
- Focus groups tend to be enjoyable to participants.

Disadvantages include:

- The number of questions must be greatly restricted.
- The available response time for individuals is limited.
- The moderator's skills in facilitating the focus group will largely influence the quality of the responses.
- Minority viewpoints may not be expressed because of group pressure, or perceived group pressure
- The focus group is beneficial for identifying major themes but not much for the micro-analysis of subtle differences (pp. 386-88).

Typological Categories

Richard Krueger (as cited in Patton, 2002) makes a clear distinction between taxonomic classification systems and typologies. Unlike taxonomies that completely classify a phenomenon, typological systems divide some aspect of a phenomenon into parts along a continuum (p. 457).

Given the nature of this initial assessment, we chose to pre-identify the typological categories for the focus group questions. The decision was in part due to our choice to use focus groups instead of some other method of qualitative inquiry. We wished to gather student perceptions of specific aspects related to relationships that were part of their experience. We crafted the questions and prompts to target student responses on those areas. The questions disallowed more open-ended conversation.

Moderating the Focus Group

Perhaps more so than with many methods of research the moderator within the focus group is pivotal to the nature and quality of the data collected. The personality, social identity and interpersonal skills of the moderator will influence powerfully the process of interaction that takes place, and the way in which the moderator behaves, and the verbal and non-verbal cues that he or she gives to the group, are crucial in the respect (Schon, 1987). A particular difficulty lies in striking the right balance between an active and passive role. The moderator has to generate interest in and discussion about a particular topic, which is close to his or her professional or academic interest, without at the same time leading the group to reinforce existing expectations or confirm a prior hypothesis. Conveying an impression of *expertise* is likely to be inimical to disclosure from participants: the moderator should indicate that he or she is there to learn from the participants, rather than the reverse. As far as possible, the moderator should ensure that dialogue occurs among the group members, rather than between them and the moderator (Patton, 2002)).

Data Collection

The Moderator read each question to the focus group. Prompts were used if the facilitator determined that the group's responses were not readily forthcoming or did not provide an accurate portrait of each individual's perceptions. Each moderator had the authority to combine, or skip questions if students' responses became repetitive or were determined to exhaust possible responses to subsequent questions.

The Focus Group participants were asked to share their perceptions of their experiences during each phase of their involvement with the partnerships:

1. **Phase One -Prior to the pre-student teaching semester**
2. **Phase Two -the pre-student teaching semester**
3. **Phase Three -student teaching semester**

The questions were designed to elicit students' perceptions of the following:

A. Alignment of Expectations and experiences for each phase

B. Relationships and communication with Cooperating Teachers

C. Relationships and communication with School of Education Coordinators

D. Relationships and communication with advisors in the Office of Clinical Experience and Certification Advisement

E. Preparedness for each phase of the pre-student and student teaching experience

Focus Groups

A. Cahokia High School Student Teacher Cohort
The Collinsville Site Coordinator served as moderator of the Cahokia Focus Group. Seven students participated. The original cohort had consisted of 10 ten students. Three students had not successfully completed the yearlong partnership program. The group met at the high school at the end of their last day of student teaching. The session was tape recorded and later transcribed. The session lasted just short of two hours.

B. Collinsville High School Student Teacher Cohort
The Cahokia Site Coordinator served as moderator for the Collinsville Focus Group. Seven students participated. The original cohort had consisted of 9 students. One student did not attend the focus group. One student had not successfully completed the partnership program. The group met after school on the day preceding their last full day of student teaching. The session was tape recorded and transcribed. The session lasted one and half-hours. student

C. Volunteer Non-Partnership Student Teachers
Following a wrap-up meeting with their Coordinator, six students who had recently completed their student teaching experiences at non-partnership sites volunteered to participate in a focus group. The Collinsville Site Coordinator served as moderator. The session was tape recorded and transcribed. The session lasted one and half hours.

Representative Student Responses

I. Pre-Student Teaching Semester

Think back to your experiences and expectations prior to and during your Pre-Student Teaching semester.

Question One:	***What were your expectations prior to your involvement? in the Pre-Student Teaching Seminar?***
Cahokia Student	**I expected it to be my favorite class. I expected that I would learn a lot of core history knowledge and I was learning a lot of educational knowledge. But I expected to find out how to use it specifically in a history context. How to make history exciting. That's what I expected.**
Collinsville Student	**I thought it was just a gateway into what we would be experiencing the next semester myself. So it was just an introduction into what we should expect.**
Non-Partnership Student Teacher	**I actually felt prepared in my content area. I had already established an understanding of how I was going to prepare lesson plans depending on the department and the content area. I thought the seminar was going to be redundant.**
Question Two:	***How did your experiences align with your expectations?***
Cahokia Student	**One of the biggest things I learned was how he (SIUE Coordinator) presented notes and everything so that I could pick up on that and carry it over. That way the students have some form of continuity and not a total change in what was going on. I did things the way that he showed us and that really helped me. I wasn't really expecting that to be what we were going to be doing.**
Collinsville Student	**Getting all of the everyday, all of that little stuff out of the way, you get to know people. Your expectations were you would be able to develop this familiarity with and knowledge of the school and students or cliental. That was good. I was expecting that.**
Non-Partnership Student Teacher	**Prior to my experience, I expected to be more involved with the class. We only met a few times during the semester because we were scattered all over at different schools, I mean.**

Question Three:	***Describe your relationship with your cooperating teacher(s) during the Pre-Student Teaching Semester.***
Cahokia Student	**I mostly observed at the beginning. She was very on top of classroom management.**
Cahokia Student	**I wish she had spent some time on lesson planning and discipline.**
Collinsville Student	**During my observations (first semester), I had some pretty good communication. She would actually take the time during the class to say why she was doing this or to make a little aside and come over and talk to me. And then during the time I was here, she and I would talk during her prep [period]**
Non-Partnership Student	**I felt like I my teacher was not pulling for me. I expected to be more involved with the class. To take a more active role and basically I was not involved at all. I was strictly there for observation purposes only and on rare occasions I was even able to work with individuals, maybe be once or twice, so my experience wan not an active role, which was discouraging**
Question Five:	***Describe your relationship with your S.I.U.E. School of Education Coordinator during the Pre-Student Teaching Semester?***
Cahokia Student	**I felt pretty comfortable with him and it wasn't so strict. I really enjoyed it. As far as getting and learning anything, I would say that the portfolio helped me a lot. I think that it helped a lot to have an open forum. I felt he was here to be a guide.**
Collinsville Student	**I guess my portfolio has been my biggest struggle both semesters. I was kind of scattered first semester on the portfolio. I wish he had given us more time in seminar to talk about it.**
Non-Partnership Student	**He was very nice. I just never talked to him. I have no relationship with him. It is not his fault, but it is just that you have no opportunities to see him. He seemed like a very open man and I believe if I had a problem, I could have called. I just think that is how it is going to be when you have so few class meetings.**

Question Seven: ***Describe your relationship with your advisor from OCECA prior to and during your pre-student teaching semester.***

Cahokia Student **I think they need to work on communicating with us. You know it is our responsibility to stay on top of things, but when tests change, requirements, when the test is switching over to the basic skills test, or when you have to get your health service records in. I went to see my advisor by chance one day and it was just by chance that I made a specific deadline. It's hectic over there.**

Collinsville Student **I had to find out everything for myself.**

Non-Partnership Student **I remember that, you know it was only like maybe four times we heard from them. Not to dog their ability to come in and give a lecture. They did those but you know we don't hear from them that much.**

Question Six: ***Describe your relationship with your S.I.U.E. Content Area Advisor during the Student Teaching semester.***

Cahokia **Mine was good. I liked her. The only thing that was frustrating was that she called me on Saturday to discuss things. I was like, it was Saturday! But, she was good and very constructive when criticism was given. She was very good at telling me what she likes and what I need to improve on.**

Collinsville Student **Good but I needed more help on lesson planning. And discipline**

Non-Partnership Student **I am so blessed that I have my content area advisor because otherwise I would have been completely lost. I feel that she was always there when I needed her. I can call her up at the middle of night saying, "I don't know what to do" and while she may not have said "this is exactly how you do a lesson plan," I can take it to her and she will treat me right.**

Question Seven: ***Describe your relationship with your S.I.U.E. School of Education Coordinator during your student teaching semester.***

Cahokia Student **It was laid back. He was pretty flexible. He was pretty receptive to our suggestions. There were days when I felt like I just needed to pack up and go home. Then I would come to seminar and everyone else was having the exact same experiences and we would talk about it. That was alright. I would go home in a good mood.**

Collinsville Student **I thought it was okay besides the portfolios. I mean like he was always there to listen to you and talk about stuff. I had the most feedback when it was individual, one-on-one. I would learn a lot and he would help me out a lot. He would help me structure a unit plan or something like that. I like how he gave us advice on how to find a job.**

Non-partnership Student **I think that it would have been good to have at least the same frequency [of contacts] as our content advisor as opposed to you know, just dealing with the content area advisor and then not having any contact with our school of education, that is where the lack of communication is.**

Question Eight: ***During your student teaching experience how would you characterize your relationship with the Office of Clinical Experience and Certification Advisement (OCECA)?***

Cahokia Student **Not a great notification of deadlines. I never learned about dates of when things ere due. I was always clueless about what was going on.**

Collinsville Student **There was not a lot of contact. They sent us the stuff about the change in certification for Illinois in the application. Did you guys get that?**

Non-partnership Student **My advisor herself is basically, I know she is knowledgeable but she was hard to get hold of. I probably have actually talked to her twice. I kind of tried to avoid the OCECA office. I think there is a lack of organization.**

Conceptual Focus- ***Think back over your experiences this year.***

Question Nine: ***In what ways have your grown professionally?***

Cahokia Student **I would definitely say that I have grown up in the area of classroom management. I remember the first two weeks of student teaching. My cooperating teacher said to me that I was going to have to get tougher. And I remember thinking that I can't be. I did an evaluation. I gave all my students an evaluation on me today. They said I was tough when I have to be, but loveable. That made me feel good. I felt like maybe I had definitely grown in that area.**

Collinsville Student	**I think I have grown a lot. It was very beneficial to be here both semesters, because I know several people that were in the traditional program. From speaking with them, they were very apprehensive and nervous about starting over again. No one ever likes being the new person. I know by the time that we got to the second semester, I felt like I was part of the staff and I wasn't as nervous and really there was no apprehension.**
Non-Partnership Student	**I learned that my world is bigger than my backyard. I am from a little white community where you don't have diversity. Learning that really helped prepare me professionally in ways that I could not before. It was a life changing experience and like I said about changing philosophy, it was nothing like it was when I started and I am sure that this semester prepared me professionally to be ready and to realize the job that I have in the world today.**

Data Analysis

For Each Focus Group responses were analyzed to determine if there were patterns in each focus group's responses to sets of questions; between individual participant's responses to each question in each focus group; and, differences in individual participant's responses to questions that were not in congruence with those from others in the group.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

Within the limits of what might rightly be construed to be a pilot assessment study, we can, with some degree of certainty conclude that communication among the players in our partnerships is uneven at best. We were of course heartened to learn that virtually all of the partnership students felt their year-long experience was beneficial. Aside from that bit of good news, we can only conclude that we have much work to do if our partnership program is to create the type of sustaining support groups that foster critical reflection on the part of our student teachers.

It seems apparent that the quality of support partnership and non-partnership student teachers received from their cooperating teachers varied considerably. Some partnership students found that having a chance to observe and interact with their cooperating teachers built a foundation of trust and support that helped them considerably once the student teaching semester began. Others we less

enthusiastic about their relationship with their cooperating teachers. Non-partnership students were limited by the length of time they had with their cooperating teachers but they too reported mixed feelings about their relationships with their cooperating teachers.

Partnership students liked some of the content of the seminars conducted throughout the year by university coordinators but they wished they had more time to learn about classroom management and lesson planning before they started student teaching. Some liked the opportunity to share "war stories" during seminar. Others felt that the seminars were not as valuable as they could have been. Some students felt the seminars helped them overcome some of their doubts. They felt they had built a sense of solidarity with their peers. Many voiced their appreciation of individual support they received from their university coordinators throughout the year. A few wished they had more direction on the development of the formative and summative portfolios; others wished they had more latitude in portfolio design.

Advisors from the Office of Clinical Experience and Certification Advisement came under heavy criticism from all groups.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The current study cannot be considered anything more than an initial effort to assess changes in student teachers' perceptions of the quality of support they receive from those most directly involved with their student teaching experience. We have a long way to go before we can comfortably feel our assessment information provides meaningful indices of change in our students' critical thinking about their profession.

Next year, we plan to build upon this first assessment effort. We will convene focus groups at the beginning of each phase of the partnership year. We will also attempt to develop a system to collect and distill anecdotal data derivative of individual conferences between and among student teachers, their cooperating teachers, university coordinators, and OCECA advisors. Taking these steps will

certainly provide a more richly textured portrait of our students' experiences and should substantially contribute to decisions regarding programmatic improvements.

Given the limitations of this initial effort, we can nonetheless address what we believe are important steps we have identified as necessary that have resulted from this assessment and subsequent dialogues. First, we will develop a more extensive assessment effort in order to develop a better picture of what are students are thinking about their experiences and their professional growth. Second, we will design and implement an effective mentoring program for our cooperating teachers that is more in keeping with best practices in mentoring so that their supportive efforts become more meaningful for the student teachers. Lastly, we will invite advisors from the Office of Clinical Experience and Certification Advisement to the seminars conducted at the high schools so that students and advisors can build more effective channels of communication.

Much work remains to be done, but we believe the partnership model for student teaching has the best potential for preparing our candidates to become inquiring professionals and reflective practitioners.

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